



ORANGE COUNTY FIRE AUTHORITY

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Keith Richter, Fire Chief

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October 24, 2013

The Honorable Bill Shuster
Chairman
House Transportation & Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
2165 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nick Rahall
Ranking Member
House Transportation & Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
2163 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Shuster & Ranking Member Rahall:

On behalf of the Orange County Fire Authority, I write in support of H.R. 3300, the FEMA Reauthorization Act of 2013, which was introduced earlier this week. I am pleased to see the Committee move forward with this legislation in a bipartisan manner.

As you know, within this legislation is authorization for the Urban Search and Rescue program. Our fire department is a sponsoring agency of one of the 28 task forces nationwide that can be activated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in response to nationally declared disasters and some international disasters. Task forces have responded to natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy & the Oklahoma tornadoes; terrorist attacks in New York, and Washington; and the earthquake in Haiti to name just a few.

The Urban Search and Rescue program is a federal program that requires training and equipment beyond the traditional capability of local fire departments. The program was established by FEMA and during its years of operation, administrative issues have been identified that require clarification in statute in order to ensure the continued viability of the program. H.R. 3300 addresses those issues regarding deployment, training, and compensation for the public and private employees who constitute a task force.

This program of activating specially trained units sponsored by local departments is far more cost-effective than establishing independent federal resources to respond to natural disasters and acts of terrorism that involve collapsed structures. While Urban Search and Rescue training can complement traditional firefighting capabilities and equipment from the caches may be used in emergencies, the program's specialized training and equipment are federal assets that are not deployed by local departments in their daily operations.

When activated by FEMA, a task force deploys 70 highly trained personnel and four search dogs. The 70 personnel are a diverse group of specialists including rescue, logistics, communications, emergency physicians, paramedics, structural engineers, hazardous materials technicians, management personnel, safety personnel, heavy equipment operators, technical information specialists and planning specialists. Under agreement with FEMA, each task force must be staffed three deep in each one of the 70 positions to insure around the clock availability of all specialty positions. These specialists are not on the federal payroll until such time as the President authorizes activation. System-wide there are in excess of 5000 personnel who must be trained and properly equipped to respond at any time.

In addition to specialized training and personnel requirements, task forces must maintain caches of special equipment that is separately maintained, stored, and reserved for federal deployment. This equipment includes fiber-optic cameras, seismic listening devices, concrete cutting chain saws, heavy lifting capability, a complete communications system, a complete weapons of mass destruction protection unit, a structural engineering unit, and a complete emergency medical unit.

Thank you for your past and continued support of this program. I appreciate your leadership in introducing this key piece of legislation.

Sincerely,



Keith Richter
Fire Chief